

William Edward Burghardt "W.E.B." Dubois

Celebrate the Century

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Designed by Richard Waldrep



William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) DuBois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts on February 23, 1868. He is considered by most historians to be one of the most influential African Americans that ever lived and one of the greatest intellectuals of any race.

Dubois received his primary schooling in Great Barrington. In 1890 he earned his bachelor's degree from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Dubois studied for his master's under the tutelage of Harvard professors George Santayana, William James and Josiah Royce. During this time he also attended the University of Berlin for two years. He received his doctorate from Harvard University in 1895. His thesis, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States 1638-1870*, became the first volume in the Harvard Historical Studies.

Dubois taught at Wilberforce College in Ohio from 1895 to 1896. It was here that he met and married Nina Gomer, one of his students. In 1896 he moved to Philadelphia and began a sociological study of the city's Black neighborhoods for the University of Pennsylvania. After concluding this study he took a position at Atlanta University in 1897 where he wrote *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899, the first sociological text on a Black community ever published. In 1903 he published a collection of essays called *The Souls of Black folk* in which he describes the Black experience, especially the efforts of African Americans to reconcile their African heritage with their pride in being U.S. citizens.

Dubois opposed the views of Booker T. Washington who advocated accommodation. He wrote in his essays, "When Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, he does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our higher minds. We must unceasingly and firmly oppose him."

On February 12, 1909 Dubois and a group of black and white intellectuals met in New York, New York and founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples, (NAACP). Dubois became the editor of the NAACP's magazine, The Crisis and also headed the publicity and research department. He resigned from the organization in 1934 because he was unwilling to accept the NAACP position on Racial Integration. He believed that Blacks should join together, separate from Whites to start their own businesses and industries and allow Blacks to advance themselves economically.

Dubois returned to Atlanta University in 1934 where he began a new journal called Phylon. He was forced to retire in 1944 because of continued conflicts with university staff. He wrote a Marxist interpretation of the reconstruction era called Black Reconstruction in 1935 and an autobiography, Dusk of Dawn in 1940.

He rejoined the NAACP and headed it's research department in 1944 but was fired in 1948 after he accused the executive director of the NAACP of selling out the cause of Black civil rights for his own advancement.

Dubois became the chairman of The Peace Information Center in 1950, an organization dedicated to the banning of nuclear weapons. The Secretary of State, Dean Acheson labeled the organization a Communist-front. Dubois was brought to trial as an agent of the U.S.S.R. in 1951. He was acquitted after a highly publicized trial. However, the government and the FBI continued to harass him and even denied him a passport to travel abroad.

Dubois was finally granted a passport in 1958 and traveled to Russia and China. His passport was revoked once more after he returned to the U.S. He also received the Lenin Peace Prize that year.

Totally fed up by this time, Dubois moved to Ghana in 1961, joining the U.S. Communist party before he left in one last act of defiance. After he arrived in Ghana he began work on the Encyclopedia Africana, a work completed by Harvard professors Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and titled Africana - The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience.

Dubois renounced his U.S. citizenship in 1963 and became a citizen of Ghana. He died a few months later on August 27, 1963 in Accra.

Sources:

Encyclopedia Britannica

Encyclopedia Africana